

Merging Occupations

Employers Want Employees Who are

Multi-Skilled

BY MEGHAN M. WALBERT

Educators at the East Valley Institute of Technology (EVIT) in Mesa, Arizona, are always looking to industry leaders for guidance on how to educate and prepare students for new, emerging careers. But sometimes, it's not a matter of a new industry emerging, but rather several previous occupations merging to form new opportunities for students. That's what happened at EVIT two years ago. The school, which offers about 40 occupation-specific programs to high school students and adults, listened to members of its program advisory councils and combined three outdated programs into one bright, shiny new program: multimedia technology.

The three old programs—photography, Web design and graphic design—needed to merge to mirror the industry's needs, said Thomas Schildgen, a graphic information technology professor at Arizona State University, and a member of the EVIT multimedia program's advisory council.

"If a firm can get a person who has cross media capabilities, it's better than hiring someone who has just one skill or



▲ EVIT multimedia technology students Mildred Ortiz (front) and Jessica Coe work on a design project in class.

the other," Schildgen said. "You might only need someone to manage your Web site four days a month." The rest of the time, that employee can use other skills, such as photography or graphic design, to work on the firm's marketing and advertising needs.

This movement toward "cross media" is something that Schildgen said he is seeing nationally, and it is getting a lot of attention at national conferences he has attended in recent months. Locally, community colleges and universities in Arizona are creating programs like this to prepare future workers to thrive in this merged industry.

"It's a delivery of whatever the customer needs," Schildgen said. "It might be totally on the Internet, it might be totally print, or it might be a combination of the two."

Companies are looking to their new hires to be a source of technological skill and knowledge—to be wired and connected.

"The industry is contracting," Schildgen said. "When the baby boomers retire, there will be a push to hire a lot more people in three to five years, so we're gearing up for that."

What They're Learning

Teacher Brian Higgins was hired at EVIT last school year to start the two-year program with a brand new crop of students. This school year, he is training



his second-year students to develop their skills even further, pursue internship opportunities and prepare for college or the workforce. Throughout the two-year program, students are exposed to photography, graphic design, Web design, branding, writing and communication.

"In the design world, you are challenged with projects that require all of these skills," Higgins said. "The students

can venture into one of these areas more than the others for their career, and that's fine. But they are going to use all of these skills to put out that image or photographic message."

And the students are learning it all on the latest equipment and software—the very same cameras, computers and software that professionals in the industry are using right now. But that doesn't mean

the focus is on the gadgets, Higgins said. Rather, the focus is on the skill, so students become more adaptable to changes in technology.

"I'm teaching them design theory," Higgins said. "I don't want to turn out people who just know how to use software. They need to learn how to design."

How They're Learning It

EVIT multimedia students aren't learning these skills by sitting through excessive classroom lectures or by simply watching Higgins create new designs. They learn by doing. And they're not just doing it for their teacher, for a grade. They're taking on real-world projects from real clients who expect them to deliver the goods.

This year, Higgins has lined up projects with two organizations that work in the drug prevention arena—Community Bridges and the Fountain Hills Youth Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition—as well as with other outside firms and EVIT's own public relations department. Multimedia students will spend the school year designing direct mail pieces, brochures and logos, and helping to develop marketing and advertising campaigns.

"This is very important to the students because they're going to have printed pieces in their portfolios before they graduate from EVIT," Higgins said. "That's huge. I didn't even have a printed piece in my portfolio when I graduated from college."

Prospects Good After Graduation

High school student Thalia Perez signed up for the class as a junior last school year, hoping to learn more about photography. She works on the newspaper staff at her home high school, McClintock High School, in Tempe, and she wanted to improve on those skills before going off to college to major in journalism. Under EVIT's old program model she would have taken the photography class. But now she is enjoying her second year in the multimedia technology class and has dis-

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covered other talents, skills and interests she didn't know she had.

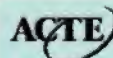
"I never thought I was good at art," Perez said. "I can't draw on paper, but I'm good with using a mouse to draw designs on a computer."

Perez still plans to attend Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication next fall to major in journalism. She also plans to major or minor in graphic design as well. She said she wants to continue developing the skills she is learning now at EVIT because she realizes that even the journalism industry's technological needs are evolving right now as more news goes online. And the more skills she has, the more attractive she'll be to potential employers.

"We're in a technology age," Perez said. "If you want to be in journalism, you have to have a wide range of skills." **T**

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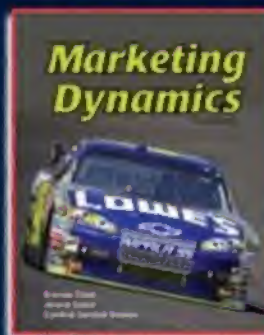
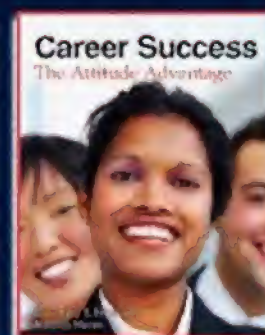
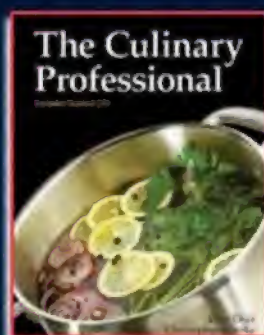
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